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Organized crime on the rise among Soviet émigrés in US

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To put it in cinematic terms, "Moscow on the Hudson" is becoming "The Godfather" on Sheepshead Bay.

Organized crime has sprung up in recent years among Soviet immigrants living in the United States, law-enforcement officials say.

According to the recently issued final report of the President's Commission on Organized Crime, an estimated 12 organized-crime groups established by immigrants from the Soviet Union are operating in New York City's growing Soviet émigré neighborhoods. Similar groups have been reported in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and seven other cities nationwide.

Nearly one-half of the more than 200,000 recent Soviet newcomers to the US live in the New York City area, principally in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, near Coney Island and Sheepshead Bay.

Most of the people who have left the Soviet Union and settled in the US in recent years are like the honest and hard-working musician portrayed in the movie "Moscow on the Hudson."

But according to the presidential commission, some 400 to 500 recent Soviet émigrés have banded together in groups to carve out sections of criminal turf in American neighborhoods.

The Soviet groups are said to be involved in extortion; fraud; selling stolen goods; burglary; trafficking in drugs, illegal weapons, and false documents; and other crimes.

Joseph Koletar, an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, says that frequently the Soviet gangs prey on fellow émigrés, but he adds that their criminal activities are not restricted to émigré neighborhoods.

The gangs' involvement in the buying and selling of stolen goods is believed to stem in part from habits formed in the Soviet Union, where the "black market" was an important source of goods and area of commerce.

The American Express Company estimated that it lost some $2.7 million in credit-card frauds carried out by Soviet organized-crime groups during the first nine months of 1984, the crime commission reported.

Soviet crime groups do not abide by the strict hierarchy of the traditional Mafia crime families, which are each organized with a boss, underboss, captains, and soldiers. "They are organized groups and they may have a lead player, but it doesn't get much more structured than that," Mr. Koletar says of the Soviet crime groups.

The commission report says that some Soviet organized-crime groups are linked to the Genovese crime family in New York, one of five major La Cosa Nostra organizations in the city. The report notes that the two crime groups have cooperated in insurance fraud scams and cocaine trafficking.

In addition, the report says the FBI "has investigated a possible connection between the KGB and [Soviet] immigrants now involved in organized crime here." The KGB is the Soviet Union's secret-police and spy agency.

US officials have long suspected that the Soviet Union has planted so-called "sleeper" KGB agents among those permitted to leave the Soviet Union for the US in recent years. Such sleeper agents, posing as immigrants, would be activated at some point in the future by the KGB to carry out specific missions.

Ethnic gangsters are in no way unique to Soviet émigrés. The crime commission report includes disclosures about organized-crime activities among recent immigrants from Sicily, Colombia, Cuba, Japan, China, Vietnam, and other countries.

Though the organized criminals are only a tiny fraction of the overall émigré population, some members of the Soviet-American community are worried that the reports about organized crime will smear all Soviet émigrés, making their already difficult task of assimilation into US society even harder.

In addition, the Congress of Russian Americans is protesting the organized-crime commission's generic use of the term "Russian" to describe organized crime carried out by recent Soviet immigrants

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who are not ethnic Russians. Peter Budzilovich, executive vice-president of the Russian-American Congress, says most ethnic Russian émigrés came to the US shortly after World War II and are not involved in Soviet criminal groups, which tend to be dominated by more recent arrivals.

More recent immigrants are similarly concerned about the reputation of the broader émigré community. "We know only what we read in the papers," says a community worker in Brighton Beach when asked of the reports about Soviet organized-crime groups. "As far as we are concerned, [the Soviet émigré] is a population like any other population," the worker adds.

"I am sure there are a number — albeit a very small number — who do have criminal tendencies, just as [in] every group that came to this country," says Robert Frauenglas, executive director of the Committee for the Absorption of Soviet Émigrés. But he stresses, "Like all new immigrant groups, [Soviet émigrés] are highly motivated. Many of them work two or three jobs, are concerned about getting a good education for their children, and are always striving to improve their lives."

The FBI is not insensitive to this point. "The Soviet émigré community, like any other ethnic group, has [only] a certain percentage of persons engaged in criminal activity," says FBI agent Koletar.

The crime-fighting efforts by law-enforcement officials against the Soviet organized criminal groups have been hampered in part by the tight-knit nature of the émigré community and a lingering distrust of government authorities by many of the newcomers.

Language difficulties have also impeded law-enforcement efforts. In one instance, a case was actually dismissed because a Soviet émigré was read his rights during arrest in Ukrainian rather than Russian. The New York Police Department's 60th Precinct has hired Russian-speaking police officers to help overcome such problems.

But according to agent Koletar, for many émigré criminal suspects the language problem is just a ruse. "The business about the language capability is a subterfuge. Everybody involved can speak English if they want to," he says.